Researcher's guilt: confessions from the darker side of ethnographic consumer research

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Researcher's guilt: confessions from the darker side of ethnographic consumer research

A reflexive approach to qualitative research seeks to uncover structures of inequality in the research encounter. On the surface, it would seem that ethnographic methods provide the conditions to alleviate this methodological instrumentalism. By employing a confessional account, this paper demonstrates how the paradox of asymmetrical rapport prevents ethnographic work from reaching its collaborative potential. Drawing from insights in an ethnographic enquiry in an arts charity, the author narrates the guilty experiences that arise when researchers reproduce a culture of commodifying informants. This is exemplified through impression management tactics that generate an illusion of mutuality, alternating with more authentic instances of co-participation. The implications of this self-perceived moral violation are discussed for the researched, the researcher and ethnographies of consumption more broadly. The paper contributes to methodological literature by explaining the potential of confessional accounts as a tool to operationalize reflexive, reciprocal practice, counteracting the demands of a knowledge economy.

Keywords: ethnography; confessional reflexivity; researcher's guilt; asymmetrical rapport; fieldwork instrumentalism; research reciprocity; ethics

Introduction

Interpretive approaches to the study of consumption enable researchers to access the experiential and sociocultural aspects of consumption phenomena (Arnould and Thompson 2005). Within this tradition, ethnographic methods that rely on participant observation and interaction with community natives have been widely adopted by consumer researchers (Arnould and Wallendorf 1994; Canniford and Shankar 2013; Kozinets 2002; Schouten and McAlexander 1995), allowing access to the natural settings where consumption practices unfold and a more textured and holistic understanding of cultures of consumption. Given the degree of personal involvement of the researcher with the researched community, ethnographers of consumption reject assumptions of objectivity as neither realistic, nor

desirable (Stacey 1988). In acknowledging the intersubjectivity of the ethnographic research encounter, reflexive practice becomes of central importance, serving as a political reaction to methodological traditions in which the researcher takes a disinterested stance towards their research subjects (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton 2009).

Considerations of reflexivity can be broadly distinguished in two interrelated but distinguishable areas, by accounting for the kind of epistemological "flaw" they attempt to address. First, reflexivity addresses issues of representation. Reflexive researchers are encouraged to challenge their assumptions of objectivity and write themselves in their scholarly stories with the purpose of enabling their audience to judge their representations of the studied phenomena. This type of reflexivity, labelled "theoretical" in methodological literature (Foley 2002), is concerned with the analytical issues that arise once we accept that the subjectivity of the researcher inevitably affects their interaction with research subjects, raising concerns with regards to the credibility of the knowledge produced. Theoretical reflexivity, thus, puts the researcher's viewpoints, background and biases out in the open, in a bid to ensure the methodological rigour of the work produced.

A second area of concern for reflexive practice is the embodied experience of research, addressing the researcher-researched relationship. A great deal of work within the critical and feminist tradition in particular seeks to uncover the power relations that often arise in the research encounter (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton 2009; Bristor and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1993; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993). Reflexivity concerned with structures of inequality in the field is more humanistic in its stance. It is concerned with how much confidence audiences can have in the knowledge produced by researchers, as is the case with theoretical reflexivity, but places more emphasis on the motives, goals and outcomes of research, questioning whose agency is privileged. Consumer researchers, for example, have problematized the inequalities that arise when their representations of respondents' lives are

construed outside the grasp of the latter (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton 2009; Hirschman 1993; Stern 1998; Thompson, Stern and Arnould 1998) and have called for more inclusive knowledge production whereby relationships with participants are collaborative (Bristor and Fischer 1993) and in which respondents are "equal sentient beings" (Hirschman 1993, 546).

On the surface it would seem that ethnographic methods, particularly where the researcher is actively involved as a participant in the research field, can provide the means to collaborative research practice and a more egalitarian research encounter. Ethnographic research is prolonged and the researcher's continuous interaction with participants provokes mutuality through intimacy and empathy. Ethnographers are, for example, better placed to understand issues that appear to be of importance and relevance *to participants*, rather than pursuing a static, pre-determined agenda, while the embodied understanding of a research field that is experienced through participant observation, can make the researcher more mindful of their prevailing ideologies. Nevertheless, while the conditions for ethnography to "level" the field between the researcher and the researched are in place, the intersubjective nature of the ethnographic approach is not necessarily sufficient to produce a collaborative and mutually rewarding encounter. Indeed, early feminist work that promotes non-hierarchical relations in the field has received criticism on the basis of the impossibility of overcoming asymmetries (Skeggs 1994), while it has also been recognised that different types of reflexivity can generate different power relations (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton 2009). Ethnography may be guilty of sustaining merely an illusion of collaboration, when the researcher employs mutuality as a strategy, but retains knowledge -both academic (including research agenda and research goals), and personal (personal beliefs and opinions) - that remain inaccessible to research participants. The papers explores these premises through the use of a confessional account that questions what attitudes were privileged during an

ethnographic encounter orchestrated by the author and why (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton 2009).

Specifically in this paper I confess experiences of guilt during a one year ethnographic enquiry in a volunteer-run arts charity. Such experiences were driven by alternating between superficial, research-led encounters with participants and more authentic instances of 'friendship moments' (Blackman 2007), resulting in the paradox of asymmetrical rapport. The diversity of mannerisms, discourses, opinions and tastes that I assumed in these encounters cultivated feelings of guilt by highlighting my inaccessibility to participants. Drawing from my confessional account, it demonstrates how ethnographic work fails in its collaborative potential when in an urban context researchers experience the syndrome of the colonizer who exploits a tribe in the name of an agenda irrelevant to the tribe itself, often one of career building or serving the knowledge economy. The paper contributes to the conversation on reflexive practice in consumer research, responding to calls for developing reflexive discourses and conceptualisations (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton 2007) that concern the embodied experience of research, by exploring and explaining the potential of confessional accounts as a tool to operationalize reflexive, reciprocal practice.

I begin by introducing the context of study and subsequently discusses the tactical and spontaneous self-staging (Diphoorn 2012) that aided me in developing rapport with informants. I then problematize the transactional nature of the relationships that researchers develop with their respondents when the latter are commodified as a source of capital for the researcher. I further contemplate how and why I experienced guilt as a response to the nature of my rapport with respondents and the extent to which an instrumental approach to research constitutes a moral violation. Finally, through the analytical lens of reflexivity and the means of a confessional account, the paper brings to the forefront the internal conflicts that arise

between the demands of a knowledge economy on researchers and the time, emotional and intellectual capital investment required of ethnographies. Implications are discussed in relation to ethics in ethnographic research and reciprocity as a maxim, as well as the sentimental indecisiveness of the researcher's identity.

Fieldwork

I conducted my first major piece of research as part of my PhD, previously having had only limited experiences of intersubjective data collection encounters through my master's dissertation which comprised mainly of one-off interviews with practitioners and that required significantly less emotional labour (Blix and Wettergren 2014) given the brevity of the research encounter. The setting of my data collection was an arts charity, an organization that puts on film, music and theatre performances and art exhibitions for the public and run entirely by volunteers. Since my approach was ethnographic. playing by the rules of ethnographic research I acquired access to the settings offering myself as a volunteer, a role that could get me a quasi-inside perspective to the community. A number of methods were used to gather data: observations, in-situ interviews and in-depth interviews.

My research presence in the community was, strictly speaking, overt. Upon enquiring for a volunteer position with the group I disclosed to members via email (an email visible to all participants through the group's central mailing list) that my motivation for participation was research related and that I was interested in observing the routine of the community and interviewing individual members. Some general information on the nature of my topic was also provided in this first contact. In practice, emails are rarely read by all 300 plus volunteers, many of whom are only involved with the charity on a casual basis, meaning that only some of the participants were aware of my bottom line of participation. In subsequent

encounters, I never explicitly denied my researcher role. For example, my reasons for joining were reiterated during the volunteer induction, as well as when the question was brought up during subsequent nights of working shifts at the building. The majority of interactions with volunteers happened during evening shifts, either in the back office of the venue or while working shifts at the venue's bar. Work shifts were rarely hectic given the small capacity of the venue, allowing ample time for engaging in conversations with volunteers, their friends and patrons. Volunteers are used to working both with familiar and unfamiliar faces at any given night, so my presence there was rarely noticeable as extraordinary, even for those who had never met me before. As a result, I would sometimes interact with volunteers who were not aware of my research-driven presence. In those cases I would rarely go out of my way to reveal my researcher identity because this revelation felt 'out of line' with my volunteer role, disruptive to the course of interaction with other members and potentially disruptive of my treatment as a co-participant. The choice of the organization as a research context was made purely on the basis of its good 'fit' with the theoretical domain of my thesis.

Instrumentalism in Ethnographic Fieldwork

In this section I discuss my interactions with my research informants, focusing first on the instances of impression management that allowed me to 'fit in' the community and subsequently on the asymmetry of rapport between participating informants and the always inaccessible researcher. My overt, participation-based volunteer role allowed me to move in the research settings freely, but not free of identity cover. Given the research goals underlying all my field relationships, my presence in the organization was always, at least in part, instrumental and involved instances of self-staging that served that agenda. Having internalised an anxiety to deliver on the project efficiently, that to some extent stood in

contrast with the nature of ethnographic work, respondents were largely valued as a resource to serve my goals, rather than individuals facing their own challenges.

Borrowing from Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton's (2007) framework of the types of reflexivities that can be employed depending on the power relations that researchers develop with participants, the research experiences presented below cannot be easily confined in a single reflexivity type. For example, power was retained during instances of self-staging where I purposefully revealed or concealed personal attributes and/or opinions as a way of facilitating rapport. At the same time, it can be argued that controlling relationships in the field was impossible, and that myself along with the researched community participants were equally subjected to the iterative effects of the research process (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton's 2007). This is exemplified, for example, in authentic encounters that I experienced in those instances when community members confused the boundary between 'real' volunteers and myself (a researcher-volunteer) and, in return, I found myself enjoying participation benefits that extended outside data collection. Amalgamating reflexivites and, by extension, acknowledging the diversity of power relations in the field, is used here to illustrate the (im)possibility of a more collaborative research approach which accounts for stakes relevant both to the researcher and the researched, aligning their goals and interests.

Impression management

Blending in with existing volunteers proved to be a challenging task. The discrepancies between myself and community members were extant in terms of cultural and social capital. I had far less knowledge of film history and experimental music genres, and lacked the overall anti-establishment aesthetic that characterised much of the building and its occupants. I was sympathetic to the group's ideological orientations, but not sufficiently knowledgeable to converse at the same level as them. I had no pre-existing bonds to members, the majority of

whom were settled in niches of like-minded, taste-sharing sub-groups of volunteers. As a result, finding a place in the community the first few weeks of participant observation was an agonizing experience. Exclusion was a relatively common experience for newcomers lacking in social capital, including prior connections to existing members or being networked in the underground arts scene of the city, and poorer in sub-cultural capital. Newcomers, myself included, that were not employed in an arts related occupation lacked knowledge and authority in their participation, finding it difficult to pitch ideas and initiatives against more experienced volunteers whose wealth of sub-cultural capital originated from a long-term engagement in arts professions. Of the dozen people that I attended an induction with, only one was still volunteering at the time of completion of the fieldwork.

In this context, the need for participation strategies became a necessity both to enable me to 'survive' in the space and to elicit research responses which were essential for my main goal of completing my research. Impression management became both a preservation tactic to ensure a level of comfort in my participation and an active technique of rapport building with informants. This involved both instances of self-staging that would make me appear more 'aligned' with other volunteers and instances of suppressing beliefs and opinions that I believed might have created obstacles to my integration. On one occasion, for example, an encounter with volunteers was hijacked by the need to employ a covert identity:

> 'While working at the bar tonight [member's name] dropped in together with a friend in order to check on the projector. His friend asked if we order drinks in bulks and I said that I thought that was the case but was not entirely sure because I had only been volunteering for few months. He then remarked that I gave the impression I had been working with the group for quite some time and that I walked in 'like I owned the room'. I felt both relieved and joyous that others perceived me as a member that "fits in". The three of us chatted about Bollywood

> and Nollywood, festivals in the UK and abroad and Greek ouzo. The topic then shifted to higher education subjects and [member's name] snidely remarked "Marketing and Communications… what do they teach you there? How to sell things?". I had to let this slip with an awkward laughter.' (Fieldnotes, May 2012)

Institutional affiliation was one of my many aspects that were 'silenced' during participation. Echoing Brewer's concerns during his fieldwork in a police unit in Northern Ireland who reflects that 'for many police officers the word 'sociologist' sounds too much like 'socialist'' (Brewer and Magee [1991],in Hammersley and Attkinson [2007]), being a marketing scholar in an arts charity, I feared, would be received with suspicion.

Further to maintaining a covert professional identity, my attitudes and beliefs were often adapted in ways that would help me to save face with co-participants and provide me with better access to conversations. Many uncomfortable instances were experienced where active participation was a struggle. In discussing, for example, the merits of various productions that were part of the program, I would often improve my staging and limit the impact of my lack of cultural capital by acquiring relevant facts before my shift and that I could subsequently use to join a conversation when the need arose. On other occasions, I was able to get closer to participants by 'taking sides' during community conflicts. Taking an interest in the debates that emerged amongst members regarding the management of the organization as part of my research agenda, I often found myself to be the auditor of different volunteers' passionate viewpoints. Volunteers would try to 'get me on their side' during such occasions, especially those more aware of the fact that I was observing them and would be reporting on them. Irrespective of personal views, I would always sympathise with informants who were ranting on co-participants, only to sympathise with those incriminated, in a different conversation, a few days later. Self-staging actively produced desirable reactions by participants; for example interviewees felt reassured by my seemingly

understanding stance and were willing to share more in-depth (and often very personal) aspects of their experience in the community. Equally, I was being produced in this process, through the eyes of my respondents, as an equal co-participant, a collaborator willing to explore along with others the nature and dysfunctions of a community that seemingly mattered equally to all of us.

Ethnographers outside the consumer research field have often 'confessed' to using self-staging techniques. For example a similar occurrence is describe by Visweswaran (1994, 62) who recalls how in her efforts to build rapport with a desirable, yet elusive, informant she purposefully concealed any controversial beliefs she held about the informant's work: '*I think I might have also told her that both of my parents were social workers, which pleased her greatly, though it was more an attempt to avoid speaking of my own conflicting feelings about social work*'. Misrepresentations of the researcher's own beliefs, thus, serve the purpose of securing access to the resources held by participants on the basis that that said participants will more openly express their culturally shared meanings to a researcher they perceive as similar to them. Normative similarities often come down to identifications of race, gender, and age or the sharing of experiences (see for example Hirschman's [1992] work with addictive consumers and how the researcher's identity as a recovering addict facilitated data collection, as well as Skegg's [1994] reflexivity notes on how being racially similar and a heterosexual provided the foundation for rapport). In my case respondents were, on average, well-educated, white, middle class, a demographic congruent to my own attributes, but disparities in terms of cultural and social capital posed great distances between us, inciting impression management.

Making sense of the extent to which my participation stance might have been instrumental was a daunting task at the time. For the most part during data collection I avoided deliberating the ethical aspects of impression management, justifying my approach

as “imperative in order to complete the task at hand”. Murray (2003, 386) documents a similar attitude to her researcher role, reflecting on her involvement with a womens’ shelter: *‘I wanted to become a sociologist and one of the requirements ‘of becoming’ is to conduct original research. Like any job, the job of field researcher involves impression management. In this way, it was possible to conceptualize these ongoing identity dilemmas as simply ‘doing my job’.* By prioritizing the serving of personal stakes researchers disrupt the potential for collaborative practice, privileging reflexivities in which the researcher holds on to their knowledge and assertions in an attempt to control the process.

Asymmetrical rapport and multiple reflexivities

While integration was always an issue during fieldwork, learning on the job how to carry out particular tasks appropriately helped me to find a place in the organization. Through my shifts I was able to make a valuable contribution to the running of events and to, effectively, co-participate. After a while I was, for example, able to run the bar as a manager rather than staff and could perform more significant tasks than just serving, like stocking and cashing out. These roles were essential in supporting events especially given that the organization occasionally suffered from understaffing and consequent enforced closures. Co-participation constructed me, in the eyes of other members, as just another volunteer. I supported this by deliberately avoiding any research-contested behaviour, for example keeping notes in any obvious way, while spending time at the venue.

While finding a place in the organization made my participation more comfortable, at the same time it highlighted my inaccessibility to participants. Asymmetry in fieldwork does not only find expression in studies adopting epistemological objectivity and where the researcher may display a disembodied authority (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton 2009; Bristor and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1993; Wallendorf and Brucks 1993), but can also be

encountered, masqueraded, in encounters when members come to think of the ethnographer as a "true" co-participant who, nonetheless, is pursuing an independent agenda. This disparity of perceptions in the researcher-researched interaction brings to the forefront the ambiguity of informed consent when conducting participant observation (Murray 2003; Wax 1982). Unlike interviewing, during participant observation it is difficult, if not impossible, for the researcher to get the same degree of informed consent from each member (Wax 1982). Participant observation does not involve a recorder which serves to remind the informant of the nature of the interaction, allowing him or her to be selective about the knowledge they choose to share and knowledge they prefer to safeguard. As a result, the informant may come to 'forget' that they are conversing with someone who is not (only) a co-participant but a researcher with their own motives and goals.

Interactions with particular members were often strategic, aligned with a more researcher controlled model of reflexivity (Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton 2009). For example, when a member of the organization trained as a yoga teacher she started offering free morning classes for members. Volunteers joined for the practice. I joined along as a way to meet and recruit interview participants. Similarly, rapport with longstanding members who were difficult to reach out to was established by deliberately pursuing particular networks of contacts. Longstanding members were generally responsible for managerial tasks that took place during the day and sometimes outside the venue itself (e.g. finance), as opposed to more mundane operations of running the organization that took place in the evenings when I took on most of my shifts. Aside from physical distance, longstanding members were generally more intimidating to reach out to and very sceptical towards newcomers and their motivations for joining, ideological congruence and commitment potential. Yet, reaching out to them was crucial for my task. To get to those at the core I would first tactically approach their network – other influential individuals who were more accessible to me, either because

they occasionally worked evening shifts or because they were more welcoming to newer members. Increasing my social capital increased my chances of accessing those harder to reach and tapping into their knowledge, by allowing me to mask myself as better established, than I actually was, in the community. In the same spirit, mundane conversations with co-participants while working a shift together were actively constructed with matters that would be of interest to my analysis in mind. Similarly, after observing various conflicts unfold in the charity's mailing lists (one of the main decision making forums for the group), I could flare up debates again by asking deliberate questions to those participants I knew were most intensely involved in the conflict.

Such techniques of eliciting responses from respondents are normalized in the literature and recognised as legitimate data collection tools. In writing up my doctoral dissertation, for example, I represented my orchestrated encounters with participants as "extracting the value of pure sociability (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995), which pertains to developing trust and provoking small talk", in my attempt to get "'as experience-near as possible (Geertz 1988)'". Arguably such tactics are an integral part of investigating while in the field but at the same time highlight an asymmetry between the researcher and participants that remains unknown to the latter. My source of struggle in this case is not just the idea that research respondents are to an extend commodified, their stories intended for exchange in an academic market that is inaccessible to them, but also their lack of awareness of the transactional nature of the relationships they are engaging in with the participant observer.

In the course of my year-long participation not all interactions with participants were driven by a research agenda. Deliberate 'surface acting' (Blix and Wettergren 2014) alternated with more authentic instances of participation when the time spent at the venue was enjoyed outside the instrumentalism that my presence there imposed. It is this crossing of the line between friendship moments and surface acting that made the research process a

source of guilt. Members generally had interesting perspectives on the world, which in some instances allowed for conversations outside the thematic boundaries of my research, enjoyed for their intrinsic value and disruptive to a result-oriented approach to participation. Some activities of the community became attractive to me for their educational and entertainment (on top of data) value. As an avid fiction enthusiast I helped co-organize a Kafka night, spending time promoting the event in the city, preparing props and designing the space with a team of co-participants. This example was an instance of 'genuine' participation in the group, carried out through authentic relations with members who, even if momentarily, became collaborators and not research subjects. 'Friendship moments' (Blackman 2007) like that, far from 'levelling' the asymmetrical relationship with informants would only sustain perceptions of me as 'true' co-participant and perpetuate feelings of discomfort on my behalf, having to manage conflicting participatory roles and motivations.

Authentic instances of participation further contest the researcher-researched relationship. On the one hand they denote that I was constructed as something else during the research process, transformed (even if momentarily) from researcher to participant. Control and power were not externally applied in the field but were inherent in the encounter, actively producing the participant observer as a volunteer. At the same time, however, authentic instances can serve towards masking asymmetry for rapport. In interchanging between collaborative participation and self-staging I further strengthened my relative position in the community, building intimacy and eliciting trust from members, ultimately coming to a position of control. It is in these multiple reflexivities that ethnography can, on the one hand provide the conditions for verstehen and collaboration, while on the other cultivate even more space for the researcher to assert authority through access to emic knowledge, human networks and community resources.

Researcher's Guilt

Conceptions of reflexivity concerning the embodied experience of research, particularly those originating from a critical and feminist perspective, have advocated how the structures of inequality underpinning research disenfranchise the dominated party and invalidate or mute their voice (see for example Bettany and Woodruffe-Burton 2007; 2009; Bristor and Fischer 1993; Hirschman 1993; Skeggs 1994). Rightfully so, in questioning the authoritative, distanced research approach, critics look to the dominated for the detrimental effects of unreflexive practice. A darker experience may also, however, be constructed for the researcher that engages in multiple roles and relationship, some authentic and others instrumental, while in the field.

Methodologically, we are encouraged to regard research informants as an outgroup, never reaching full integration in fear of losing the ability to 'observe'. Yet, the intersubjectivity of ethnographic work can provoke a moral mutuality (Gable 2014) that highlights our unequal relationships with research participants that continuously turn from research capital to peers and back again. Capitalising on these relationships seems like an inherent instrumentalism of ethnographies, capable of inducing researcher's guilt.

Outside the world of consumer research, the exploitative effects of a market ethos cutting across academic research are apparent in the anthropology field that pioneered ethnographic work. Anthropologists have often been implicated in imperialist agendas, participating in the domination of research subjects (Villenas 1996), for example by curating museum collections of dying cultures or facilitating international development projects in native areas (Foley 2002). This type of 'colonizer syndrome' may manifest itself, albeit in different formats, in the study of urban consumer cultures as well. Past the fieldwork period my time at the community started to 'pay off' in many different ways, earning me a higher degree and a lecturing job, and even recognition and praise outside the academic community

with friends commenting on how ‘cool’ my job was, since it required me to spend time in what they thought of as an ‘arts bar’.

A juxtaposing argument as to whether asymmetrical rapport in the ethnographic encounter merits feelings of guilt is put forward by feminist writer Beverley Skeggs (1994) who, in exploring the theme of exploitation in research, notes that discrediting participants in a category of “passivity” doesn’t account for how these participants are constitutive of the research encounter. While not negating the community’s effect on my own participation (not least in the form of co-participation), my interpretation of the research encounter is suggestive of the idea that in many ways, informants gave me a ‘gift’ (Jacobs 1980, 377), which I never returned. The contributions of my work had an academic orientation that was irrelevant to participants themselves. Drawing from the principles of equity theory, guilt, in this scenario, is rooted in ‘the comparison between one’s own outcomes and others’ outcomes as the criterion of fairness’, where disproportionate gains on any side of this interaction cause distress (Baumeister et al. 1994, 247). This conception of guilt may also be interpreted as largely self-inflicted, an emotional self-punishment (Greenspan 1992), reflecting over-investment in the project.

Various convictions have helped me towards alleviating such feelings. At times I rationalised the idea that a researcher’s gains out of a research process will always be disproportionate to those of the natives. I would also set boundaries to self-staging by maintaining principles of never lying to participants or crossing over to what, in my mind, would constitute open deception. Guilt was also alleviated through being able to serve the community, not as a researcher but as a volunteer. As anthropologists offered western services to poor or technologically undermined communities (e.g. medicine, transportation), I tried to be ‘of assistance’ by carrying out various tasks that were of help to the charity. On

some occasions I also worked shifts in understaffed nights, helping to prevent the common phenomenon of last minute cancelations due to lack of sufficient volunteers for key roles.

Informants' ability to negotiate rewards of some kind during the research encounter also had some effect on my perceived asymmetry of the relationship. The majority of members that participated in the research, either through formal interviews or more informal accounts, gave their perspectives to my benefit and without expecting anything in return. A few others showed interest in a more exchange-based relationship seeking to maintain equity through some kind of transaction (Baumeister et al. 1994). For example, when I approached one desirable and hard to get to informant via email for an interview she explicitly asked me to "do a hire" for her in return (email exchange, July 2012). 'Hires' refer to events which are not organized by volunteers themselves but by outsiders renting the space for one evening. These are often less appealing to volunteers because they generally do not serve their motivations for volunteering. For example, hires do not necessarily reflect the tastes and preferences of members of the community and they tend to bring in a large number of patrons, making shifts very tiresome and leaving little to no space for socialising in the same way as in-house events do. Some informants also used the interview as a forum on which to vent their anger towards other members of the community, enmeshing me in their own power struggles. Seeing the interviewer as some kind of 'advisor', those informants perhaps benefited from the interview just by reflecting on their own participation and expressing some of their frustrations.

Discussion

In this paper I have discussed how impression management in fieldwork and the resulting asymmetrical rapport with participants can be detrimental to ethnographers who are unable to make sense of their role in their researched communities. 'There are multiple and

contradictory field realities' (Povrzanovic 2000, 155), compelling the researcher to practice multiple critical reflexivities. During my fieldwork, participants were respondents, friends and co-workers, holding each role for a few moments at a time. In this context, a sentimental indecisiveness emerges out of the researcher's inability to make sense of their role and practice.

The stakes of any academic project are always high, be it the completion of a doctoral degree or the research program one pursues, urging researchers to prioritize personal goals of success. Aligned with an increasing market orientation in academia that has brought on changes to the status of knowledge as a commodity (manifested, for example, in propriety rights over knowledge or in conceptions of knowledge as a "language game" amongst elite academics) (Barnett 2000), as well as changes in the scope, aims and process of research (Mountz et al. 2015), we might interpret the researcher's sentimental indecisiveness as one of the subtler and more insidious effects of a market culture cutting across the micro, day to day experiences of the research encounter. In prioritizing personal stakes ethnographers necessarily marginalize other field roles and identities, such as co-participant, collaborator, advisor, knowledge conveyor, indecisive about what a researcher's purpose in the field *ought* to be. The myth of the kindly ethnographer (Fine 1993) urges researchers to be friendly, understanding and even solution bearing for informants and the issues they face. An academic orientation to research success, by contrast, commands that researchers are 'allocated to a respectable place in the corpus of scholarly writings' (Wax 1982, 35). At the same time, impromptu relationships in the field reconstitute the ethnographer's participation and may bring out more private aspects of their identity. Guilt, or other uncomfortable emotions, arise from being implicated in the contradictions and ambivalence of these roles. Reciprocity as a maxim and confessional accounts that make the technologies that generate

knowledge more visible are discussed below in an effort to address the sentimental indecisiveness of the ethnographer's roles and promote collaborative research practices.

Reciprocity as a Maxim

From an ethical point of view it is well established that ethnographers have a moral obligation to confidentiality and to be sensitive to respondents' values. There is little guidance, however, on the nature of the relationships we develop and the ways in which we rely on such relationships to complete projects potentially irrelevant to the community itself. Gable (2014, 256) argues that 'anthropology is a guilty discipline', can we infer a similar proposition for consumer research? Paraphrasing Ellison (1996), researchers prioritise personal success and reward public display of the knowledge they constructed while in the field (not least in the form of publications). In doing so, they conform to a standardized set of procedural ethical guidelines (Guillemin and Gillam 2004) that institutionally legitimize their research approach, but are less concerned with the micro ethics that arise out of interactions with participants. During such performances, theoretical and methodological rigour conceal any confessional instances of what took place in the field.

The problematic of power asymmetries in the research encounter can, for example, be attributed to the 'knowledgeable' researcher avoiding to share said knowledge with the stakeholders it concerns the most. In a critical ethnographic study concerning consumer culture and class, Springwood and King (2001, 411) recall the first author's encounter with an informant named Hori:

> 'Although Springwood would interpret Hori's landscaping activity as an empowered signifying practice, ultimately implicated in a global, late-capitalist flow of commodity, simulacra, pleasure, and consumerism, he never genuinely foregrounded with Hori his theory of late capitalism and the commodity sign of the

> global market. For Hori, every contour of his field of dreams project was essentially in opposition to materiality, class, and consumption.
>
> (…)
>
> Should Hori have been informed that he represented, to Springwood, late capitalism's consuming avatar? Well, perhaps not in such academic parlance, but perhaps'

Alluding to the asymmetry of information between the researcher and the researched, this example illustrates how the knowledge and narratives produced about respondents' lives are located too far away from the consequences of these narratives. The lack of reciprocation observed in this example (also illustrated in my own confessional account), can be attributed to various factors, including individual researchers and their values, research training, expectations of our field particularly in the context of the knowledge economy, expectations of academic audiences, or a combination of all of the above. Guilt arises when utopian academic ideals of transforming people's lives through public research and education are failing to deliver. The researcher, eventually, completely disengages from the source of knowledge after distancing him or herself from the investigated group, securing inaccessibility to respondents on a personal level and, often, neglecting to return the favour in the form of positively impacting respondents' routine. Ethnographic methods in particular, while on the surface provide the conditions for a more collaborative and empathetic relationship with participants, are guilty of aggravating asymmetrical relations by camouflaging intimacy for mutuality (Stacey 1988).

Confessional accounts of guilt can serve as a moral motivation for reflecting on the transformative potential of our work (Trainor and Bouchard 2013). From a Kantian perspective, seeing informants as means rather than ends in themselves is a moral violation (Wax 1982) that provokes guilt as the objection of the researcher to having acted in a manner

perceived to be morally wrong (Baumeister, Stillwell and Heatherton 1994). Kant's absolutist moral philosophy, proclaiming humans' duty to obey moral laws that are only pure when based on a priori principles as opposed to empirical ones that are gained through experience (Kant 1965), is largely at odds with the constructivist paradigm followed by many in the consumer research field. Rigid assertions of morality, for example, do not account for a relativist conception of reality, or the subjectivities of the researcher and the researched. Yet, there are principles we can borrow from this idealistic conception of ethics, particularly when it comes to Kant's thesis that humans should find reason in their morality (Kant 1965). From the perspective of the metaphysics of ethics, research that does not achieve a reciprocal relationship that, amongst other stakes, serves its participants, is irrational in its aims. A reciprocal relationship with informants, thus, points towards a reflexivity that is driven by reason.

Reciprocity as a principle underlies a particular research approach, that of participatory action research (Ozanne and Saatcioglu 2008), and can also be readily associated with researchers in the field of transformative consumer research that put emphasis on benefiting consumers and the environment (Mick, Pettigrew, Pechmann, and Ozanne 2012). The paper does not seek to promote a particular paradigm nor research agenda so instead, reciprocity is proposed a value, method and lens (Trainor and Bouchard 2013) that can underlie an array of research designs within the interpretive consumer research realm. Reciprocity acknowledges the inevitability of power distance between researchers and their informants by involving participants more actively in the inception of research questions, the identification of problems to be studied (Trainor and Bouchard 2013), the development of conversations during interviewing (Moisander et al. 2009) and, the construction of narratives that represent participants' realities (Stern 1998) with the goal of mutual benefits for those involved in the research encounter. Reciprocity should also transcend the boundaries of

impact as an academic exercise and concentrate on ‘substantively collaborative projects’ that prioritize the public good over and above servicing the knowledge economy (Mills and Ratcliffe 2012). Reciprocity also postulates that writing for publication or promotion and writing to make a difference in the lives of respondents is not a dichotomous choice (Terenzini 1996).

Reciprocity may certainly face obstacles in the face of demands for high productivity and efficiency in the compressed time frames demanded by the neoliberal university (Trainor and Bouchard 2013; Mountz et al. 2015). Ethnographic fieldwork in itself is not ‘recommended’ under these conditions as it is seen as a time consuming method that involves long term relations with participants (Mills and Ratcliffe 2012). Reciprocity is also not panacea to asymmetries in the field, nor to the researcher’s uncomfortable feelings. Issues of ‘who and how to reciprocate’ (Trainor and Bouchard 2013) will inevitably arise, including tensions between reciprocating informants and satisfying other stakeholders (such as employers, funding providers and academic audiences). However discussing more openly how our work might benefit communities and what informants would like to see happen as a result of their participation (Trainor and Bouchard 2013) can go a long way towards levelling the field between academia and social life.

Reciprocity as a value in research can then be seen as part of an effort to defining our own metaphysics of morals. Kant employs the notion of maxims (Acton 1970), subjective principles of action that are personal to the individual (and hence disconnected to procedural or institutional ethics), as guide to action. Reciprocity as a maxim opposes the individualistic ideology that might be cutting across from the market ethos pertaining in academia to our day to day research encounters. It does so by inducing ethics of care in the production of ethnographic knowledge, whereby care of knowledge works as a “medium through which the self and the other are treated as ends in themselves and not simply as functional for the

efficiency of a system" (Drummond 2003, 65). Reciprocity as a maxim can, thus, act in a self-regulating fashion for researchers more generally and ethnographers in particular. Confessional accounts constitute the practical tool through which ethnographers can monitor their behaviours in light of such maxims.

Confessional Accounts in Consumer Research

Along with a reflexive turn in qualitative research, ethnographers of consumption are encouraged to challenge their assumptions of objectivity and write themselves in their scholarly stories, enabling their audience to judge their textual representations. Yet, the purpose of employing theoretical reflexivity (Foley 2002) is restricted to providing a believable data collection account, 'silencing' particular subjectivities and concealing flawed or ethically challenging aspects of the research encounter. A review of published ethnographies in the field of consumer research indicates that too often authors are following a scientific 'reporting' style, specifying, for example, data collection sources, justifying sampling methods and other techniques employed to provide additional credibility to the material, constructing an overall impression of a rational, straightforward experience. Accordingly, doctoral students and early career researchers are socialised into a system that reproduces a relatively conventional way of framing research methodologies, to which confessional accounts are obsolete. In my case, the impression management employed while in the field and the uncomfortable feelings of guilt that accompanied the asymmetry of rapport with informants never made it to written accounts of my work. My thesis in particular included a reflexivity section which carefully omitted emotional introspections which could have been deemed non-scientific (Denzin 1997), as well as any confessions to field practices which may have reflected negatively on my data collection techniques or research maxims. Theoretical reflexivity (Foley 2002), from this standpoint, is critiqued as 'being subjective

while trying to sound objective', sustaining the perception that 'emotional' and 'analytical' are two different aspects of data (Diphoorn 2012).

Confessional reflexivity is discussed and conveyed far more sporadically (Foley 2002; Thompson et al. 1998). Consumer researchers in particular have, primarily, employed confessional reflexivity in contexts of working with vulnerable consumers, such as adolescents, ethnic minorities, patients and low income consumers (see for example Jafari et al. 2013; Hamilton, Dunnett and Downey 2012; Ozanne 2009) and it is widely recognised that such sensitive contexts cause emotional, psychological and sometimes even physical intolerance to researchers, significantly affecting the research process. Outside 'sensitive' contexts, addressing 'darker' research experiences in consumer research is somewhat of an odd pursuit. Ethnographers of consumption are known to engage with an array of seemingly non-sensitive urban tribes– from festival goers to bikers and surfers. However, (comparably) more mundane fieldworks can not only generate darker experiences but, due the misleading 'innocence' of the chosen sites, conventions that privilege theoretical, over confessional, reflexivity and a focus of neoliberal universities on 'outputs' rather than 'process', stay for the most part in the mind of the researcher and hidden from written reports or discussions.

'Hidden' ethnography (Blackman 2007) is a term used to describe situations and emotions that involving the researcher and the researched that remain undiscussed and unpublished outside of oral tales and anecdotes (Coffey 1999). Sharing such emotions in ethnographic accounts is often 'prohibited' by a fear of losing legitimacy or is deemed irrelevant in achieving publication goals. 'Darker' field experiences have, more commonly, made their way to written accounts outside the field of consumer research, narrating for example the ethnographer's dislike for their subjects (see Gable 2014), romance and intimate relations in the field (see Rabinow 1977; Turnbull 1986), drug use (Thornton 1995; Adler 1985) or lived experiences of violence (e.g. Povrzanovic 2000). Anthropologists have also

consistently maintained ‘confessional’ writing styles (e.g. Malinowski 1967) in which the researcher is seen as contradictory, vulnerable and evolving. Yet, such accounts have not gone without criticism, having been characterised ‘narcissistic diary decease’ that is irrelevant to knowledge (Geertz 1988) and shallow textual reflexivity (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Others may recognise the value of such accounts but point out that confessions may themselves be used in instrumental ways that only serve to support and reinforce a researcher’s position. For example, within consumer research Thompson et al. (1998) criticise confessional accounts for paradoxically always contributing to the overall credibility of the researcher’s account when, in principle, their purpose should be to account for those aspects of fieldwork that are defected, inadequate or limited given the intersubjectivity of the encounter and the goals, emotions, desires and biases of those involved.

Confessional accounts, while affiliated to both participant observation fieldnotes and to researcher introspection accounts (Wallendorf and Brucks 1993), present some differences in their scope and goals. Unlike researcher introspection the researcher is not the sole focus of the account. Confessional accounts are reflexive with regards to how the researcher’s actions change the social order in the field, the effects and consequences on the respondents, as well as how said changes affect the researcher. By contrast to participant observation diaries, the purpose of confessional accounts in not to analyse the culture of the investigated community acknowledging the researcher’s presence, but to investigate those matters that elucidate, strain and/or alleviate the researcher-researched bonds.

The use of confessional accounts aligns with the principles and goals of “slow scholarship”, that goes against the economic rationalism of the neoliberal university (Mountz et al. 2015). They allow researchers to “carry out work on themselves” (Drummond 2003, 60), learning how to devote care to all aspects of the research process as required by

reciprocity maxims and against the demands of a knowledge economy. Taking my account as an example, a confessional approach to narrating what took place in the field and why, highlighted how the researcher's ability to scrutinize forces that construct the social structure of the research field changed from time to time within the same research encounter. I was able, for example, to withhold knowledge at times, using it to my advantage to advance personal goals, but at the same time, as more authentic instances of participation suggest, I was absorbed and constituted by respondents. Unlike theoretical reflexivity, this confessional account did not scrutinize the research process to (solely) provide credibility for my written representations of the studied phenomena but it aided me towards validating my (darker) experiences as a stake in the research process, accounting for how I controlled respondents and was simultaneously controlled by the research environment. It finally assisted me in uncovering and understanding the motivations for such behaviour and in considering how I might regulate and reconfigure future research behaviours, driven by maxims.

Conclusion

By employing a confessional account, this paper has explained that while ethnographic studies provide the conditions for researchers to collaborate with their research respondents, in practice such utopian pursuits fail when consumer researchers reproduce a culture of commodifying informants. As a concluding note, it is worth acknowledging that in bringing down the 'myth of the kindly ethnographer' (Fin 1993) this paper has, in the process, constructed a different myth, that of the solely exploitative consumer researcher, by focusing entirely on the darker aspects of my data collection experience. In discussing issues of asymmetry and sentimental indecisiveness however, we must remember that researchers have complicated, diverse motivations for doing research. Research instrumentalism does not arise

in detriment to, but alongside constructive aspects of the research encounter such as the researcher's love for their object of inquiry or the pleasure of writing. In light of these more complex motivations underlying the research process, reciprocity maxims and confessional accounts as a tool to operationalize reflexivity and bring to the light processes of knowledge production, are not calls that serve to de-vilify the consumer researcher but to enable us to consider our research goal priorities and, ultimately, the purpose of our job.

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